

OBSERVING SHABBAT—NO MATTER WHAT!

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How is it possible to use the 25 hours of Shabbat to bring more happiness and fulfillment into our lives?

We have so many choices about how to use those 25 hours. The obvious choice is simply to do what we otherwise do on the weekend. We can do things with family and friends, recreation or entertainment, take a trip, spend some quiet time in nature, or read for fun or intellectual stimulation. Then, too, often there's the compelling motivation to do chores, shopping, or work for one's job.

To make the choice in a way that is fulfilling beyond the moment, we need to have some clarity about what we want out of those 25 hours. Almost all of us want a change, relief even, from the demands and pressures of the rest of the week. But that's tricky to get. Our employers, professions, or businesses often *demand* that we work during those 25 hours. The typical requirements of daily life—shopping for instance—often *demand* that we deal with the frustration of driving in traffic or negotiating crowded store aisles and checkout stands during those 25 hours.

It seems that when what we want from those 25 hours collides with the usual demands of our day-to-day life, we often feel powerless. It's not to say that we *never* protect the things we want from the assault on them by demands that drain us physically and spiritually. But all too often, what we truly need falls victim to what someone else demands of us. We find it difficult to make compelling arguments to others and ourselves that we're justified in refusing to meet the demands placed on us at the expense of our spiritual well being.

The situation often boils down to, it's just *our* preference versus *their* preference, *our* opinion versus *their* opinion, *our* leverage versus *their* leverage—that we shouldn't have to get mauled at the mall, go down in the hole to dig coal, or clean out the sewage clean-out during our 25 hours of Shabbat.

So what's a Jew to do, and what suggestions does the Torah offer?

The Torah instructs us to “Remember [זכור] the Sabbath day, that you may sanctify it.” (Exodus 20:8) Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105), the dean of Biblical commentators, teaches that in regard to “*zachor*,” the word is in the active (פועל) form, “an expression of ongoing *action*. . . .” This seems strange to us at first hearing, because the idea of “remembering” doesn't seem to involve action per se. But the reference is to the action of the mind and soul, not the body. The “active theme” of Shabbat, ironically, is that we achieve an

inner calm, which allows us to see and appreciate the beauty of creation and those we love, hopefully including ourselves.

We have a variation on that commandment in the book of Deuteronomy, yet there it reads not “remember” but “*Observe* [שמור] the Sabbath day, to sanctify it, as Adonai your God commanded you.” (Deuteronomy 5:12) Here the word *shamor* (שמור) refers, ironically, to the “passive theme” of Shabbat—to *observe* is not to work. But this is passivity of the body in relation to *work*, not passivity of the mind and soul in relation to the *spiritual* activity required to protect the Shabbat.

The Sages teach that God said both “remember” and “observe” in a single utterance to show us that they are equally important. (Mechilta 20:8) So we are commanded to be physically inactive in respect to work, but mentally and spiritually active to keep the Shabbat.

But what does it mean that we are *commanded*?

It means that if we choose to ignore the working of creation, according to our wisdom tradition there will be consequences. In traditional language, our soul will be cut off from the beauty of its connection with God.

What then do we forfeit?

- The respite and peace that follow from allowing ourselves to celebrate the conclusion of creation, both God's and our own;
- The contentment that comes from continuously developing and fully utilizing our capacity to love and be loved;
- The heartfelt gratitude we feel towards our Creator for the beauty of Creation when we allow ourselves the opportunity to experience it;
- The excitement of learning and teaching that clarifies the path of our lives and the lives of those we love; and
- The joy of experiencing Shabbat together in a community that is consciously dedicated to doing *mitzvot* that nurture life.

All this is by way of *commandment*—not suggestion, not advice, and not recommendation—because the consequences that are tied to remembering and observing are certain. It is our God that is telling this to us. That is, the Divine Mastermind that continually creates the world from moment to moment is said by our Sages to have created rules that govern the creation. This is not simply a matter of personal preference or opinion, but the way in which the creation is ordered. In short, without 25 hours a week of a clear connection with God, our spiritual health becomes diseased.

So we owe it to ourselves, to our families, to our congregation, to our community, to our people, and to our country that we not allow ourselves to be deprived of this 25-hour gift every week.

To those who say to us, “You have to work this Saturday,” “You have to do the shopping this Saturday,” “You have to clean out the garage this Saturday,” there *is* an answer. But to have the courage to ignore our fear and anxiety and give that answer, we have to trust that if we take care to feed our spirit, God’s creation will somehow feed our body.

It requires a certain amount of trust in God—trust in the working of creation if you will, which is suggested in the writing of Guillaume Apollinaire:

“Come to the edge,” he said.

They said, “We are afraid.”

“Come to the edge,” he said.

They came.

He pushed them . . . and they flew.

We can fly too if we have a *spiritual* answer to the endless demands that we give up Shabbat.

What is that answer?

“I’m Jewish, and the God of my people teaches me to remember and observe the Sabbath—and that’s what I’m doing, no matter what!”

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